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ABSTRACT

This brief paper reviews the literature and provides guidelines on how instructional practices to promote self-determination can be used to help students with learning disabilities make effective choices and decisions. Self-determination is linked to making good choices through five steps: know yourself; value yourself; plan; act; and experience outcomes and learn. Specific barriers faced by students with learning disabilities in learning to make effective choices and decisions include not acknowledging the disability; lack of self-understanding; learned helplessness and self-deprecating attributions; inappropriate or ineffective socialization skills; and difficulty in executive functioning skills. Discussion of curriculum suggests infusing instruction in making effective choices and decisions into school counseling programs, regular and special academic classes, career preparation classes, and extra-curricular activities. Nine factors that support self-determination instruction are listed such as partnerships among students, parents, and professionals in decision-making; opportunities for making choices; encouragement in taking appropriate risks; supportive relationships; accommodations and supports for unique student learning needs; and predictable consequences for actions. Other suggestions include teaching students to use a mnemonic device to remember choice and decision-making steps and using specific instructional programs to teach component skills of choice and decision making through self-determination. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

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Teaching Decision Making to Students with Learning Disabilities by Promoting Self-Determination

Alan Hoffman

The ability to make effective choices and decisions is one of the most important competencies students, including those with learning disabilities, need to be successful in life after high school. Promoting student self-determination provides an excellent framework within which to teach students how to make effective choices and decisions. Effective choices are those that the student will see as beneficial, and these models of self-determination can be used to teach students to make choices and decisions that (a) are consistent with what is most important to them and (b) enable them to achieve more positive adult outcomes. A general overview of best practices in promoting and enhancing self-determination can be found in a previous ERIC digest (Wehmeyer, 2002). This digest specifically examines how instructional practices to promote self-determination can be used to help students with learning disabilities make effective choices and decisions.

How is self-determination linked to learning how to make good choices and decisions?

Self-determination is "a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society" (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998, p.2). Thus, self-determination involves assessing one's own strengths, weaknesses, needs, and preferences. Field and Hoffman (1994) describe five steps to enhanced self-determination. The five steps are

1. Know yourself
2. Value yourself
3. Plan
4. Act
5. Experience outcomes and learn.

Making choices and decisions is central to each of the five steps. For example, one sub-component of the step "Plan" is to set goals. To set a goal, a decision must be made. A sub-component of "Know Yourself" is to decide what is important to you. A key goal of instruction to promote self-determination is to enable students to make choices and decisions based on a foundation of knowing about and valuing themselves (Field & Hoffman, 1994). If we support students in becoming more self-determined, we are, in essence, enabling them to learn how to make choices and decisions that are based on what they most value.

What barriers do students with learning disabilities face in learning how to make effective choices and decisions?

Students with learning disabilities face some unique barriers to becoming self-determined, which are identified below:

- Because learning disabilities are generally hidden disabilities, and because in our culture having a disability is often viewed as stigmatizing, many students with learning disabilities do not acknowledge their disabilities. Not acknowledging their disabilities diminishes their available resources, as most resources for adults in post-secondary education or employment require disclosure of the disability in order to obtain the resource. If students choose to disclose their hidden learning disabilities, they must then deal with the perceptions and misperceptions that others may have about them.
- An understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses and acceptance of self form the foundation for making effective choices and decisions (Field & Hoffman, 1994). The stigma attached to learning disabilities encourages many students to hide their disabilities, inhibiting the development of self-awareness and belief in themselves.
- Learned helplessness and self-deprecating attributions among students with learning disabilities have been widely documented (Bos & Vaughn, 2002). Learned helplessness is the effect of failure, where the belief exists that past failure predicts future failures. An accurate assessment of one's strengths, weaknesses, needs, and preferences along with confidence in one's abilities is fundamental to effective choice and decision-making. Lack of a positive, realistic self-concept is frequently identified in the literature as a difficulty for persons with learning disabilities (Price, 2002). This inaccurate assessment of one's own traits may inhibit a student's ability to make effective choices and decisions.
- Inappropriate or ineffective socialization skills are frequently cited in the literature as issues for individuals with learning disabilities (Price, 2002). Positive relationships (which rely on strong social skills) are fundamental to self-determination and making effective choices (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
- Many persons with learning disabilities face difficulty in executive functioning skills, such as organizational and planning abilities, mental flexibility, and task initiation. These executive functioning skills are fundamental to making effective decisions and choices. For example, mental flexibility is critical to being able to examine an array of options, before choosing or deciding on one. Students need to be aware of multiple options from which to choose before they are able to make an informed choice. Planning and task initiation are critical to acting on a choice or decision once it has been made.

Where does instruction to promote self-determination and more effective choice and decision-making skills fit into the curriculum for students with learning disabilities?

The majority of students with learning disabilities are served in general education classrooms. This is good news for many reasons, since instruction to promote self-determination is important for all students, including students with and without disabilities. In addition, the delivery of instruction to enhance self-determination in general education classes provides an entry point to the general curriculum. Many of the skills related to learning to make effective decisions and choices are easily linked to state standards and benchmarks as well as to standards

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developed by such entities as the American Counseling Association, the Secretary's Commission on Acquiring Necessary Skills (SCANS), and the Character Education Partnership.

Instruction to enable students to learn how to make effective choices and decisions can be infused into school counseling programs, academic classes (e.g., Language Arts, Social Studies, Creative Writing), academic support classes (e.g., resource rooms, study skills), career preparation classes, and extra-curricular activities. Such instruction should not be an "add-on"; it should be infused throughout the school day so that students are able to see the practical application of the instruction.

Some areas of instruction related to effective choice and decision-making may best be provided in settings where issues specifically related to disabilities can be addressed. For example, developing an understanding of one's learning disability, the ramifications of the disability and whether or not to disclose the disability is a critical area of instruction and support for students to help them make effective choices and decisions. In addition, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process provides an excellent vehicle through which choice and decision-making skills can be taught. These disability-specific areas can be addressed in special education classrooms or through individual tutoring, coaching, or counseling sessions.

What are the school or programmatic factors that support or inhibit self-determination instruction?

If students with learning disabilities are to learn how to make effective decisions and choices, they need opportunities to (a) acquire skills such as identifying options, anticipating potential consequences, and accessing resources and information, (b) practice the skills, and (c) reflect on and learn from their experiences. The optimal way to provide opportunities for students to learn how to make good decisions and choices is to infuse instruction related to self-determination at the school or program level as well as the classroom level. Field and Hoffman (2002) identified nine quality indicators for self-determination instruction:

1. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes promoting enhanced self-determination are addressed in the curriculum, in family support programs, and in staff development.
2. Students, parents, and professionals are equal partners in individualized educational decision-making and planning.
3. Students, family members, and educators are provided with opportunities for making choices.
4. Students, family members, and educators are encouraged to take appropriate risks.
5. Supportive relationships are encouraged.
6. Accommodations and supports to address unique student learning needs are provided.
7. Students, family members, and educators have the opportunity to express themselves and be understood.
8. Consequences for actions are predictable.
9. Self-determined behavior is modeled throughout the school environment.

What resources are available to promote self-determination and teach choice and decision-making?

A number of instructional methods, materials, and strategies have been developed to enable educators to teach students the knowledge, skills, and beliefs that lead to self-determination. They include resources that can be used to teach choice and decision-making through self-determination. Examples of strategies include

- Teaching students to use a mnemonic device to remember steps in choice and decision-making as it relates to the IEP is recommended by VanDeusen, Bos, Schumaker, and Deshler (1994). They use a strategy called IPLAN, which stands for Inventory. Provide your inventory information, Listen and respond, Ask questions, and Name your goals to help students learn to make and present choices in their IEPs.
- Helping individuals with learning disabilities to develop greater self-awareness about their disabilities is important for effective choice and decision-making. Counseling can assist students with learning disabilities to develop greater awareness of their disability, understand their need for supports, recognize the type of supports that are most effective, access those supports, and understand how they have adapted and adjusted to their limitations and strengths.
- Using specific instructional programs to teach component skills of choice and decision-making through self-determination (e.g., awareness of options, knowledge of individual strengths, weaknesses, needs, and preferences, and evaluating outcomes of choices).
- Applying coaching strategies to provide individualized support for students with learning disabilities to help them make choices and achieve the results they want (Byron & Parker, 2002).

Information about a variety of materials and strategies to support choice and decision-making through self-determination is available through the University of North Carolina Self-Determination Synthesis Project website (www.uncc.edu/sdsp).

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